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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000251

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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH RIHS CHAIRMAN: DEFENSIVE IN FACE OF  
FRANK DISCUSSION OF USG CONCERNS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: On January 24, Emboffs (Poloff, Econoff, PolMiloff) conducted a meeting with Tareq Al-Essa, chairman of the influential Kuwaiti-based Islamic charity, Revival of the Islamic Heritage Society (RIHS)--"Jamiat Ahiya Al-Turath Al-Islami." During the meeting, Al-Essa was charming but evasive; rejected allegations of RIHS support of Islamic extremists, including al-Qaeda; defended RIHS's charitable work as genuine and divinely guided for the benefit of all faiths; criticized the U.S. for misguided suspicions against innocent individuals and organizations; evaded questions on RIHS financial auditing procedures; and urged greater understanding of Islam and Muslims. Emboffs, while acknowledging the many positive contributions of Islamic charities, underscored the USG's serious concerns with RIHS operations and the organization's suspected support of Islamic extremists. End Summary

12. (C) On January 24, Emboffs, representing the Embassy's Political, Economic and Pol/Mil sections, met with RIHS Chairman Tareq Al-Essa to convey USG concerns about the integrity of the organization's overseas operations, including allegations of ties to Islamic extremists, and to elicit information on the organization's internal operating procedures.

13. (C) While acknowledging the positive work of Islamic charities, Emboffs stressed the USG's serious concerns with RIHS operations abroad and its suspected support for extremist elements. Al-Essa, a Salafi Muslim and U.S.-educated engineer (University of Colorado-Boulder), emphatically rejected allegations that RIHS supports Islamic extremists, including al-Qaeda, an organization he dismissed as un-Islamic, alleging he had "not heard of Al-Qaeda before September 11" and that his organization was the first in Kuwait to condemn the 9/11 attacks. After extolling the universal virtues of charitable giving, Al-Essa defended his organization's charitable track record, particularly in support of orphans, explaining that every dollar is accounted for and that his books were (and remain) open for review. He asserted that the organization "knew how to do its job" and that it pursued noble objectives in line with the spirit of all three Abrahamic faiths. To further underscore his point, Al-Essa explained that the organization photographs completed projects, such as wells, with serial numbers embedded in the concrete, to verify expenditures with financial receipts.

¶4. (C) He voiced anger at the abrupt closure of RIHS's Pakistan offices in 2002 and criticized the USG for "assuming everyone is guilty," pointing to alleged detentions in Guantanamo of five RIHS employees from the Pakistan branch shortly after the closure. Al-Essa claimed that the five men were released after two years of detention with no evidence of wrong doing and that raids on his Pakistan office by U.S. and Pakistani authorities failed to prove any terrorist-related activities.

¶5. (C) When pressed about internal auditing and tracking procedures for fund transfers, Al-Essa, appearing evasive and unresponsive, failed to offer any details, but claimed in general terms that "there are accountants both inside and outside Kuwait" actively involved and that their findings were known to the Central Bank, local banks, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¶6. (C) On personnel vetting and hiring procedures, Al-Essa explained that the organization lacked resources to have full-time employees and was staffed by like-minded volunteers who shared RIHS's worldview of a peaceful Islam that rejected violence and extremism. He expressed confidence in his organization's ability to vet volunteers to prevent infiltration by extremists through background checks with local contacts designed to reveal a candidate's ideological worldview. He stated that country managers check a volunteer's "ideology, mentality, and what books he's written" before bringing the individual on board. He explicitly rejected accepting Shias, Sufis (Islamic mystics), and "Takfireen," dismissing their beliefs and practices. (Note: Takfiri belief is the ideology of violent extremists. The term is used by Muslims who disdain the doctrine that indiscriminate violent jihad can be waged against infidels

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and supposed apostates. End Note.)

¶7. (C) According to Al-Essa, RIHS country managers are approved by host governments and are not always Kuwaiti nationals, because "Kuwaitis don't like to go outside Kuwait." The RIHS offices in Bangladesh are headed by a Muslim Sudanese teacher. The Albania office is headed by a Kuwaiti national and the Thailand branch is managed by a Thai Muslim. He added that the organization's overseas operations were limited, totaling no more than six offices, and that the bulk of RIHS's work was implemented through partnerships with other charitable organizations sanctioned by the host government. He appears to have hiring authority for all RIHS country office managers, but relies on country managers to vet and recruit lower-level volunteers. He expressed zero tolerance for "bad workers," pointing to a 1999 episode where he personally traveled to Afghanistan to relieve a Libyan project manager alleged of being an abusive manager.

¶8. (C) He dismissed recent press reports in Bangladesh about RIHS ties to Bangladeshi extremist elements as a smear campaign launched by disgruntled community members. He proclaimed the Bangladeshi government had actually turned to RIHS to solicit the organization's assistance in raising public awareness against the dangers of extremism. Al-Essa pointed to improved relations with the Bangladeshi government through RIHS outreach efforts in seminars and publications of religious edicts/pamphlets condemning terrorism and civilian killings. Al-Essa promised to provide copies of such edicts/pamphlets in the future to Emboffs.

¶9. (C) In closing, Al-Essa urged greater understanding of Islam and its peaceful message, pointing to its historical and theological ties to Judaism and Christianity. He left open the possibility of meeting again with Emboffs.

Bio Note and Comment

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¶10. (C) Tareq Al-Essa was born in 1947 and is a founding member of RIHS (est. 1981), serving as chairman since 1995. He also heads a contracting company involved in construction and holds a civil engineering degree from the University of Colorado--Boulder (1978). As a student, he has also resided in Annandale, Virginia with the host family of a retired U.S. Colonel Johnson, apparently a former military assistant to Secretary MacNamara who has since moved to Hawaii. He speaks

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very good English and travels frequently to Central Asia and other Islamic countries to inspect RIHS-funded projects. His visa to the U.S. was canceled in 2004 after his name appeared on a Consular watch list. His son, Abdullah, is a graduate of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

¶11. (C) The meeting took place in Al-Essa's modest private office at his contracting company, Tareq Al-Essa Contracting Company, LLC. Al-Essa was clearly unwilling to answer more detailed questions pertaining to RIHS's internal operational controls and preferred at times to go off on tangents about Islamic history and theology. He was visibly upset by the closing of RIHS Pakistan operations. He is a traditional Salafi who espouses conservative Islamic beliefs, further underscored by his distaste for Shias and Sufi Muslims. He has an engaging demeanor, which he uses to his advantage during conversation. He redirected the conversation, interjected jokes, and complimented Emboffs when the conversation became tense. Overall, he appeared visibly uncomfortable when pressed about details of RIHS operations. He attempted repeatedly to distance his organization from al-Qaeda and terrorism. Although Al-Essa shared little detailed information about RIHS operations, the meeting offered a valuable opportunity to directly convey USG concerns and to ascertain a better understanding of his personality and role in this influential organization.

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LeBaron